

Alvin Johnston

Warroad, Minnesota

Former commercial fisherman and author of fishing history of the region: “A Time to Fish and A Time to Dry Nets: Lake of the Woods.” 1996.

In 2020, Mr. Johnson is surely deceased. His son Art, who was the last fisherman on Lake of the Woods resided, at the time of this interview, in Park Falls, Wisconsin. Phone: PH: 715.762.4072.

August, 20, 2004. Alvin Johnston:

“At the peak there, we were fishing about 80,000 feet of gill nets and 60 or 70 pound nets. I suppose we had a fishing fleet of 30 or 40 boats. The boats were 30, 40 footers, wooden boats then. My dad, of course, was a wooden boatbuilder. He built some models that I have in my library here. Not many people know how to build those wooden boats.

I’m 87 years old. My legs bother me a little bit, but I drive yet. My wife will be 90 this fall. We’ve been married 64 years.

My son Art is over in Park Falls, Wisconsin. PH: 715.762.4072. He was the last fisherman here. Then he went back to college and got an engineering degree. He’s working for the U.S. Forestry Service. They’re building two bridges right now. He travels a lot. He was quite a successful fisherman, very good.

The state legislature passed the law. Each fisherman got \$70,000. They simply gave them a check. Of course, in looking back, I always go for more, and we probably could have gotten double that. You see, really, when you get down to it, the legislators don’t give a shit. They don’t spend a penny of their money. It don’t cost ’em nothin’, when you get down to the bottom line. What they did here was, they put a surtax on the hook-and-line fishermen—which is *still* on there—to pay for the bailout, and hell that’s been years ago. But they never take ’em off you know. A surtax? It’s a tax for a special project, they put an extra, I don’t know what it was—five or ten dollars—on the license, to justify paying for buyin’ out the fishermen. But as far as I know, they never took it off neither! So it was actually a helluva money maker for ’em.

By the time of the buyout, the number of fishermen had been cut down because they had not been issuing licenses.

Like most of this stuff, where you really run into it, and we were *very* involved in it, the DNR theirself, that’s where your real enemies are. It’s really not the public as a whole, you can maneuver around a lot on that. Nine times out of ten it’s the goddamned government agency that screws you. They’re the ones that take you.

In our case we had this one guy, who was kind of a nice fella, but he was smooth and smart. The only way you can whip those guys is to get on the good side of the politicians—some important senator or representative or some damned thing, you know? They can put their foot down but the rest of you can’t, including the public.

We battled them pretty good. Now Arthur, my son says, “We could have whipped it, I think. Now with what I know. Now I’m a lot smarter in politics. We probably could have whipped them.”

But see our fishing now is going down. When the nets left, the quality of the fishing was so

good they were letting 'em fish with two lines, and, hell, nobody paid much attention to the limits. And now they're coming up with proposals of 17 inch on walleyes which is, of course, too much because they spawn at 15. To turn 'em back and stuff like that. The fishing as a whole on the lake has declined, with the exception of some of the professional resorts, you know, that's well equipped and got good guides, you know. They can catch fish. But we've had a decline in the fishing. The fishing did not improve, and neither will yours. There's no way in hell it's gonna improve because commercial fishing controls the harvest. Sport fishing does not. Sport fishing just turns the whole thing, it neither limits the amount of fishermen, nor the amount of anything else.

However, the direction is leaning a little bit, up in Alaska, to try to control the harvest for sportfishermen too. But it's never going to work because the only species they want is the gamefish. So you have a crowding effect, I think, of the other species, that soon take over more and more. So the quality of the fishing goes down.

I think it was '86. It should be in the book. 85? Arthur was the last one and I think he finished in 1985.

The main legislator that we fought was Bataglia (sp), a miserable SOB. He got killed in an airplane accident, afterwards.

Most fishermen with quite a bit of knowledge, I think you have a pretty good chance of whipping some of these people because there's a lot of people who really don't like to have people throwed out of work. And some people like to buy the fish.

This fishing resource we have here, in some countries it would be carefully cultivated for food.

About a million dollars was spent for the buyout. (\$800,000 according to a Sport Fishing Institute blurb in paper) Less than 20 guys.

Dick Knutson? I think he was in the oil business, filling stations or some damned thing. I'm not sure. He was a miserable bastard. I don't know whatever happened to him. The last I know, politically, he was going to run for some office, but he didn't get it. I don't know what the hell ever happened to him.

More money from tourism? No, that doesn't ring a bell so much as the fact that they want to be prominent.

This guy used to come and see me and say, "If you come with me we'll go and see the DNR commissioners and we can straighten out this and that and the other." But he was a pukey guy, that's all there is to it.

The fact of the matter is, I don't know if he's up here very much now anymore.

A good share of the sports people didn't like him neither. That's true of these guys in the end.

By the way, a lot of 'em makes a lot of money. You know there's no way in hell when you get these sportsmen collecting on up and passing the hat around and donations. By the way, there is no damned law that anybody ever checks the receipts.

Like in Minnesota, hell, they'd have meetings in Minneapolis, in big auditoriums and, jesus, thousands of dollars are rolled on in and in this particular case I have no question but he just put it in his pocket. And I think that's true of so many of these.

When you get right on down to it, some of these guys that we're listening to in the damned paper, sportswriters and stuff, well hell, there ain't a damned bit of hero in them. See they're all getting a helluva salary for this crap. So the genuine part usually isn't there.

They're using the resource, they accuse us fishermen of using the resource to make a living, which is what they're doing. I don't know how this will all end.

I do know our fishing has decreased as well as the size has definitely gone down. We have a helluva healthy lake that survived a hundred years of what I call a "controlled harvest," when you get a commercial license. A bad harvest is the sports...there's no control whatsoever. And there's no balanced harvest of rough species. And to tell you the truth there's really not too many people—most fishermen always cared for the resource, you know, loved the lake.

The sports groups, well, hell, we've got resorts here that have got 25 or 30 charter boats. And this is a cold business, it isn't like we supported our family, out lifting nets, and producing food, by the way. But you're right, nobody cares where the food's coming from, they must be flyin' it all in, huh?

All our fish up here is coming from Canada, Lake Winnipeg. They have an extensive walleye fishery up there.

I think there's still some commercial fishing on the Canadian side of Lake of the Woods that's grandfathered in through Indian people.

A DNR report? That's accurate. The state of Minnesota did a study in 1970. A survey done by the state. We were producing more fish here, out of Lake of the Woods, I do believe, than in Lake Superior at one time. On the American side. We outfished them. We had a really abundant lake. See, LOTW has a maximum depth of about 35, 40 feet, so you have a shallow lake with lots of sandbars. The spawning is so good here they claim it wouldn't do any good to have a hatchery. The reproductive deal is very good.

The long-range thing that might help save, even where you are (Louisiana), but here we're talking of a freshwater inland lake, like the Great Lakes or something, is that age old one that defies all the politicians—the simple fact that if our fishing gets bad, I noticed this year a decline in the amount of boating that we had on the lake. Some people think that with everyone coming here to fish, sooner or later, the last fish would be caught. But that don't really work that way in the way things go in the world.

What happens is the resort business is so damned fragile. If fishing goes down, your resort business goes down. People stop coming and that gives the resource a break, kind of through the back door, you know?

Because we're talking resource management, and that's another thing people should get through their damned head. You're talking resource management of, what, fifty years? So, to see an incline in twenty-five? These resources are many hundreds of years old so to get changes can't be produced overnight. So if you screw up that resource it might take a hundred years to make it back. Or many many years. You're not going to change a resource in a lousy five. Bad spawning and things could change it.

Well, we have Red Lake, which is in an Indian reservation. They completely closed that. That was quite a walleye lake. I don't know whether they've opened it. They had basically unrestricted fishing for both sports and commercial. When I say closed I meant to sport fishing as well. That was closed ten or fifteen years ago and they probably have a pretty good lake now.

Picture of author on back of cover? I have it someplace, probably. I don't know where the pile

would be.

Pictures of Art? Very good pictures in Minneapolis-St. Paul paper. They ran articles once in a while.

He was a helluva good fisherman. I don't know why that is, he seemed to be able to catch so damned many fish, I don't why some guys are good at that.

Around in here, when we were fishing in the lake we never even bothered using a depth finder most of the time, we knew the depths or else we used a damned sounding line. Because the depth finders, we'd pound them apart on the boat and they'd get screwed up and stop working.

One of my other sons tried it with trapnets. We went through that and even bought a 40-foot steel tug, out of Wisconsin. We had nets up to 30 foot deep. We never did great, the knowledge wasn't good. Now my brother was a pound netter, with stake nets and all. He did quite well. We tried it just before they banned the gill nets. Then they moved in and restricted any kind of a species of gamefish. And another thing happened, we had a real thriving mink ranch business.

They were using rough fish and we could catch tons and tons in traps. When the fur business started going, well then our rough fish market, we were taking tons and tons of rough fish and feeding mink. I don't think they have any mink farms left.

The book is honest, genuine as hell. And it wasn't wrote by no college professor. The pictures are pretty good. I never did sign up with an agent, they wanted 55% or some damned thing. We did the whole thing ourselves.

They'd call me the Patriarch of the fishermen.

I've had people come back now to me, that I've fought pretty bitterly with, because they're worried about the lake, and downrigging and all this and that. But I say it isn't downrigging or any of those things. It's not how you catch the fish, it's how many you harvest that counts.

Up here people go into a marina or a dock and we used to have a good share of the resorts that kept so damned many fish that they served them in their restaurants.

No warden would ever go into a resort and check their docks and check their limits or anything. And still won't. 'Cause if they do somebody phones a damned legislator up, "He ain't gonna come back and rent no cabins." For Lake of the Woods, which is a pretty fair sized like, I think the warden in town has got a 16-foot Crestliner with a goddamned little outboard, somebody from Minneapolis who couldn't find his way out to the end of the harbor, even. That's enforcement.

And if my experience is right, and it is right, if you ever want to see a game hunter destroy our resources, go on into the sportsmen's group. The guys that killed all the buffalo, all the pigeons. I always say that someday they'll be standing there with 10-guage shotguns shooting the last goose that flies overhead.

This is the direction of harvest that we're moving into that means only the very affluent will have the privilege pretty soon, for instance, as fishing gets tougher on the lake, if you want to pay \$75 an hour for a charterboat, he'll get you some fish. But the guy who brought his wife and kids on up here, and put his little boat in the lake to go out and catch a little fish and have a good time, he'll have to find another place 'cause he won't be able to catch the fish. Not without expensive downriggers, a 30, 40, 50, 100-thousand-dollar boat. In other words, the affluent can still go on out and shoot polar bear, grizzly bears and all that. Go on up to Alaska and, hell, some guy'll take you out there with a helicopter and fix you right up. But most of us aren't into at that

level.

Driving deer with 30 or 40 people...

That's my observation here and I know 'cause we're in tourist country here. It is pretty much now. The fishery where we sold our fish is an Indian gambling casino now. Now I would say to guests, if fish was harvested from the lake and processed for people to eat that like fish and don't like to fish, or older people, what's a more beneficial thing to the country, a commercial fishery or is it the casino, with a few hundred slot machines goin'?

I spent months down there (Biloxi, Mississippi) during World War II, in the Air Force. At that time there was that big cement wall along there.

End of Alvin Johnston interview#

I had interviewed Art Johnston a month later, in September 2004 but seem to have lost it.

BACKGROUND ON LAKE OF THE WOODS FISHERY IN MINNESOTA 1985

If honesty and fair play are part of the legislative process, it was not apparent to us.

Alvin Johnston, commercial fisherman
Lake of the Woods, Minnesota

Lake of the Woods is the fortieth largest lake in the world, ranking behind such giants as the Great Lakes and the Caspian Sea. Sixty miles wide by 70 miles long, the freshwater lake covers nearly one million acres and is dotted by 14,000 islands. Lake of the Woods bridges the border with Canada—more than two-thirds of its area lies within the provinces of Manitoba and Ontario while the state of Minnesota claims the rest.

French voyageurs were probably the first Europeans to explore the lake, where they encountered its original inhabitants, the Cree and Sioux. LaVerendrye built a fur-trading post on the shore of the lake in 1732. Commercial fishing began in the late 1800s, after Canadian railroads began to connect the lake's isolated port settlements to outside markets.

By 1900, Minnesota was licensing 50 pound nets and 80 fyke or "trap" nets.

These large stationery nets are expensive and working them is labor-intensive. They were owned by established American fish companies, like Booth, Baltimore, Finke, Ried, and Sandusky, which employed hundreds of men. After emptying the nets into specialized lifting boats, the workers iced down sturgeon, walleye pike, goldeyes and whitefish in wooden boxes, and shipped them to freshwater fish markets in Chicago and New York.

In 1912, Minnesota allowed the use of 80,000 feet of gillnets on the lake. Gillnets are more mobile than pound and trap nets and can be used in open water. They were also less expensive to make and handle. This "poor man's gear" encouraged laborers to quit their company jobs and get their own boats, until the pound nets were all but gone and the small, independent gillnet operators were the only ones left on the lake.

Each licensee was allowed to fish 4,000 feet, a limit that would stand for 35 years, when it was reduced to 3,000 feet. The nets were set in thousand-foot-long strings with an anchor and

marker buoy at each end. The minimum mesh size was four inches, and the nets were 30 meshes—about eight feet—deep. With smaller mesh, pound and trap nets are volume gear that take small and large fish, while gillnets are far more size-selective.

The maximum depth of Lake of the Woods, on the American side, is 35 to 40 feet. In this relatively shallow water, fishermen hauled their gillnets by hand, towing out open 16- to 18-foot skiffs—“lifting boats” —for the job.

According to Alvin Johnston, “At the peak there, we were fishing about 80,000 feet of gillnets and 60 or 70 pound nets. I suppose we had a fishing fleet of 30 or 40 boats. The boats were 30 or 40 footers, wooden boats then. My dad, of course, was a wooden boatbuilder.”

The state of Minnesota’s Department of Natural Resources did a study in 1970. According to that report, says Johnston, “We were producing more fish here, out of Lake of the Woods, I do believe, than in Lake Superior at one time. On the American side. We outfished them. We had a really abundant lake. See, LOTW has a maximum depth of about 35, 40 feet, so we have a shallow lake with lots of sandbars. The spawning is so good here they claim it wouldn’t do any good to have a hatchery. The reproductive deal is very good. The long-range thing that might save the fishing is that when fishing gets bad, people don’t come, the resort business goes down and gives the resource a break. The resort business is so damned fragile. ...”

According to the 1970 Minnesota Department of Natural Resources report, from 1955 through 1968, the state’s net fishermen landed 34.3 million pounds of fish, an annual average of nearly 2.5 million pounds over the fourteen-year period. Ontario fishermen reported another 28.7 million pounds during the same period.

These landings included a variety of species: bullheads, burbot, perch, saugers, suckers, tullibee, whitefish, northern pike and walleye pike. Fishermen got the most money for walleyes, sauger (a close relative of the walleye), northern pike and yellow perch, which were also the most recreationally desirable species. Poundwise, the majority of landings was of tullibee and suckers, low-valued rough fish that were in great demand as mink feed during the 1950s and 1960s, when the fur-ranching industry was booming in the area.

Minnesota fishermen worked the lake until “Changing politicians along with a surge in tourism created an anti-fishing lobby that destroyed the industry in 1985,” wrote third-generation fishermen Alvin Johnston in his retrospective book, “A Time to Fish and A Time to Dry Nets: Lake of the Woods.” Johnston, whose grandfather settled in the budding fishing port of Warroad in 1897, represented his fellow fishermen during virtually all of the twentieth-century fish fights that eventually led to the demise of the lake’s food-producing industry. (On August 22, 2004, Mr. Johnston was 87 years old.)

“In my family, our two boys Alan and Arthur grew up believing that ‘fishing was in their blood,’” wrote Johnston. “They were out helping me lift gillnets while still in grade school. They, the fourth generation of my family, would be the last to commercially fish the American side of the lake, when new statutes and regulations destroyed the industry.”

CONTROVERSY/ATTRITION

According to Johnston, Warroad, in the southwestern corner of the lake, was its major commercial fishing port, while the towns of Roseau and Baudette focused more on the sportfishing trade. During World War II, when most of the commercial fishermen were in the service, sportsmen from the two towns, assisted by the Baudette game warden, pulled strings to get the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to permanently close a portion of the lake to

commercial fishing by denying the renewal of several fishermen's pound-net licenses.

"The problem facing the DNR was, 'What to do with the commercial fishermen when they were discharged from the service and came home to find their business gone?'" wrote Johnston. "In order to appease the displaced veterans, the Minnesota DNR decided to make the rest of the commercial fishermen pay the bill. They used the time-old system, 'Rob Peter to pay Paul.' The way it worked was: The law allows the gillnet license 4,000 feet of gillnets. So the DNR reduced, by executive order, the amount of each gillnet license from 4,000 feet to 3,000 feet. They then gave the displaced, Northwest Angle pound netters each 3,000 feet of gillnet to try and appease them. The result was to increase the gillnet fishery while decreasing the pound nets on the lake by 18 nets.

"It was a low blow to the fishermen by the DNR because it reduced their license footage by 25 percent. That meant catching less fish, resulting in less income for each fisherman.

"Flush with success, the same sportsmen's groups then decided that the entire lake should be closed to netting."

In 1950, state Representative Curtis Olson testified to legislative committee members: "Tourism is the economic future of Warroad and Roseau County. The gillnets are catching all the trophy-size walleyes from Lake of the Woods. There's nothing left but tiny fish for the sport fishermen who have paid a license fee to fish."

Johnston, representing the Minnesota Fish Producers Association, countered that: "Unless rough fish are controlled, they will compete with game fish for feed and habitat. If the burbot, tullibees, suckers, perch, and saugers dominate the fish population there will be a proportionate decline in the walleye fishery. Should the lake experience excellent walleye spawning years, an increase in numbers will slow down the growth rate as they compete for food and space. When that happens, more walleye pike will be caught in numbers, however, the fish may be small. Fish cannot be stockpiled like gold or silver. They are a renewable resource that live and die no matter what method of removal is used. Our commercial fishing industry helps to maintain a healthy fish balance by removing the rough fish.

"Commercial fishermen love the lake and will do nothing to destroy its fish population. We are small businessmen that make a living using our own two hands to remove fish from our nets. The sportsman uses his two hands to remove the embedded hook in the mouth of the fish. The only difference between the two of us: One does it for fun and the other does it to make a living."

Thanks to the intervention of the St. Paul American Legion, whose service officer informed Johnson, "I will help you. Nobody is going to push veterans out of business, especially the State of Minnesota," a compromise was reached that allowed fishermen to keep their nets.

Without going through the legislature, the DNR, by commissioner's order, placed a moratorium on the issuance of new gillnet licenses. Existing fishermen were allowed to keep fishing until they died or retired, but they were not allowed to transfer their licenses.

Working without added competition may have initially appealed to the fishermen but locking out new recruits could only lead to the industry's demise. As the political clout of the commercial fishermen declined with their numbers, impatient sportsmen kept the pressure on. Political skirmishes during the 1960s and 1970s frustrated those sportsmen who wanted the lake for themselves, but the fights also gained them new allies.

"Commercial fishing creates more than its share of political controversy," wrote Johnston. "It was a local issue for many years, until the 1970s, when the big city newspapers began to fan the

fire. Soon as that happened the politicians knew the fishing issue would generate votes for them.”

The sportsmen made their final push in the early 1980s. Johnston who'd turned them back more than 30 years before, with the license moratorium agreement, proved again to be their main obstacle. While the sportsmen wanted to end commercial fishing outright, the third-generation fishermen sought to preserve the fishery by letting netters transfer their licenses to their children or other new fishermen. “It seemed like an impossible dream but without it we had little or no leverage. I decided to fight to the end for it,” he wrote.

The following excerpts are from Johnston's book. Not only do they describe the fight that led to the demise of commercial fishing on Minnesota's Lake of the Woods, but they serve as a preview of most other fights in other states:

“Tourism was and is promoted and subsidized by the state as the number one industry, with all the politicians jumping on the bandwagon. Their opinion was that commercial fishing was not compatible with tourism despite the position of the fishery research people in the Minnesota DNR. In 1970 and again in 1980, DNR research pointed out that (1) sport fishing harvest exceeds the commercial harvest two to three times in weight and four to five times in number (2) sport fishermen harvest a high percentage of walleye before they reach maturity contributing to small size fish by limiting the number that escape for further growth and (3) all age classes of walleyes had very healthy populations, and Lake of the Woods was Minnesota's best fishing lake.

“The fact that Lake of the Woods was already producing Minnesota's finest walleye fishing did not change the hue and cry of the sport fishing community. In the 1980s, they wanted it better than the best. They refused to acknowledge the fact that the commercial catch was only 15% game fish and 85% rough fish. They did not believe the DNR when they said there was plenty of walleye to maintain adequate brood stock to maintain a stable walleye population in Lake of the Woods for both the commercial and sport fishery.

“Walleye, saugers, and northern pike are the favorite sport fish. Twenty different species of rough fish populate Lake of the Woods, each one competing with the other and the sport fish. In Lake of the Woods, the burbot is the most likely species to influence the walleye population because it is both a predator and competitor for both food and space. The tullibee is by far the most bountiful fish in the shallow Minnesota waters. It is a plankton feeder so does not compete with the walleye for food. In fact, it is food for the walleye. However, tullibee schools are so dense that they crowd out all other species, including walleye pike.

“Since the end of World War II, we had enjoyed the support of State Senator Sinclair from our district. A fine Senator, he was respected and was one of the most powerful and fair lawmakers in the state. After Sinclair's retirement, Senator Stumpf and Representative Jim Tunheim changed the balance of political power in our area, and ignorance again ruled. We no longer had friends in the legislature. Without their help we had little or no chance to save commercial fishing. Supported by the sportsmen, the politicians and the upper level bureaucrats of the DNR argued that commercial fishing was not compatible with their vision of how to use Lake of the Woods....Not only did we have our own politicians to fight with, but distant and politically ambitious Detroit Lakes Senator Collin Peterson introduced legislation to close commercial fishing on Lake of the Woods. Our troubles mounted when a political committee calling itself “Save Our Game Fish Committee” was spearheaded by an unknown from the

Fargo-Moorehead area. His name was Dick Knutson and he had lots of money and contacts...Like Senator Collin Peterson, this 'nobody' had found a home fighting commercial fishermen.

"Our opponents used all the power of the media. We soon became a favorite target of the Twin Cities sports writers. The attacks were brutal and unfair.

"Using common sense and proven facts we tried to fight back by writing articles and making personal contacts with members of the legislature and sportfishing community, but we were ineffective. If honesty and fair play are part of the legislative process, it was not apparent to us. Representing ourselves as hard-working independent decent folks, we were asking nothing more than a chance to make a living as commercial fishermen.

"In the past we were able to generate reluctant support when we testified that the mink industry was dependent on commercial fishermen and that it employed over a hundred people and generated hundreds of thousands of dollars for Roseau and Lake of the Woods counties...All the fish caught by commercial fishermen were now being used for human food, and as usual, the consumer was ignored in this issue."

The DNR ended up appointing a four-man committee to come up with an agreement on the issue. In addition to Johnston, who represented the commercial fishermen, there was a fish buyer, a Baudette lodge owner, representing the sportfishing-resort industry, and Richard Knutson, who represented the "down-state sportsmen's organizations."

(According to Mr. Johnston's not unbiased assessment, "Dick Knutson, I think he was in the oil business, filling stations or some damned thing, I'm not sure. He was a miserable bastard. I don't know whatever happened to him. The last I know, politically, he was going to run for some office, but he didn't get it. Did these sportfishing leaders hope to make more money from tourism? No, not so much as that they wanted to be prominent.")

The committee proved evenly divided on the issue, and was getting nowhere until a sympathetic commissioner informed the commercial men that they enjoyed the full support of the governor, who said he'd veto any bill that discriminated against a group of legitimate businessmen. Emboldened with that news, and exhausted after a full day of arguing, Johnston lit into resort owner John Beckle: "John, I know plenty about the tourist business, things that can make your business more difficult than it already is and if you are going to take the commercial fishermen down I am going to take you with us. I do not know how much you are worth, but I think I can match you dollar-for-dollar and I will spend every penny I have fighting you. John, we are going down together."

Johnston's outburst led to a compromise that closed certain areas of the lake to gillnets but also allowed fishermen to transfer their gillnet licenses. Additionally, the DNR commissioners' order called for a thorough study of the fishery by the University of Minnesota, and a two-year cooling off period, after which the agreement was to be reviewed.

"It was a dream come true," wrote the triumphant Johnston, of the 198- agreement. "My two sons, Alan and Arthur, would both have a gillnet license. They would become the fourth generation of my family to commercially fish Lake of the Woods. I transferred my license to Alan, and Arthur bought "Two Gun" Brewster's outfit." __

This wasn't how it was supposed to turn out! Impatient with the gradual phase-out of commercial fishing, the sportsmen had tried to accelerate the process by banning gillnets. Instead, they were outmaneuvered by the commercial fishermen, who ended up securing themselves a place on the lake!

With victory snatched from their grasp, and facing the distasteful prospect of sharing the lake with the commercial fishermen for at least two more years—if not forever! —it was time for the sportsmen to call their friendly politician. “The very next year, State Senator Collin Peterson reneged on his word, ignored the scientific research, and introduced a bill to eliminate commercial fishing on Lake of the Woods,” wrote Johnston.

“We were astounded to hear of the Senator’s, the sportsmen’s, and the DNR’s double cross. We felt the next two years would be trouble free, allowing us to concentrate on the difficult task of making a living as commercial fishermen on Lake of the Woods.

“Meeting with Sen. Peterson in his Senate office, he obviously was more concerned about trying to get U.S. Representative Arlan Stangeland’s job than he was in listening to common sense and scientific research. The misery he was putting us through was just political hay for his career as a politician. He knew that if he was to challenge Stangeland he needed the name recognition that his anti-commercial fishing bill would generate. He told us that he agreed with the DNR fishery research that there was nothing wrong with the fish population on Lake of the Woods, but he said that there was a *public perception* of a problem so that’s why he had to remove commercial fishing.”

When the ambitious Peterson introduced his net-ban bill to the senate committee, Johnston told the senators that the commercial fishermen were getting a raw deal and that the new bill was not what had been agreed upon the year before. “I indicated there was no future for our industry when our own government’s commitments would not be honored by the State’s legislative bodies and the DNR,” recalled Johnston who, after meeting with several senators, concluded that none of them would support the commercial fishermen. They did, however, express concern about destroying the livelihoods of so many people, and indicated a willingness to work out a financial program to assist the fishing families.

Against the wall, Johnston indicated that the fishermen would look at a forced buy-out program, if one could be agreed on. “Our DNR contact was with the DNR’s new director of Game and Fish, Dick Hassinger. He was a ‘grinning jackass’ that laughed at us when we tossed out our first buy-out amount that was taken from the 1970 DNR study on the lake. He indicated to us that as far as his office was concerned, we would get nothing. Several times he told us that the sportsmen of Minnesota pay his salary and he does what they tell him to do.”

After weeks of haggling with DNR officials to reach a “fair and just” amount of money, Minnesota’s commercial fishermen agreed on a buy-out plan that was based on the amount they received for their harvest of walleye. “We would be given nothing for the loss of the ability to catch any other fish, so we got nothing for 85% of our traditional catch.”

According to Johnston, “The state legislature passed the law. Each fisherman got \$70,000. They simply gave them a check. Of course, in looking back, I always go for more, and we probably could have gotten double that. You see, really, when you get down to it, the legislators don’t give a shit. They don’t spend a penny of their money. What they did here, they put a surtax on the hook-and-line fishermen—which is still on there—to pay for the bailout, and, hell, that’s been years ago. But they never take ’em off you know. A surtax is a tax for a special project, they put an extra, I don’t know what it was, five or ten dollars on the license, to justify paying for buyin’ out the fishermen. But as far as I know, they never took it off neither! So it was actually a helluva money maker for ’em.”

By the time of the buyout, the number of fishermen had been cut down because they had not been issuing licenses (less than 20 guys). About a million dollars was spent for the buyout, said

Johnston. (\$800,000 according to a Sport Fishing Institute quote in the newspaper.)

“Contrary to common knowledge,” continued Johnston, “a commercial fishing license can still be issued by the DNR with the provision only that no gillnets are used and that no walleyes are harvested. But without walleyes and gillnets, there is no longer an economic incentive for anyone to fish.

“Things are different now—the big lake is looked at as a recreation body of water, something that is only useful to play on. As long as fishing is good the boats will flock in—as the quality of fishing declines so will the sport fishermen. They will find other lakes to fish and enjoy boating.

“On the other hand, the commercial fishermen loved the lake. It was our bread and butter. We stayed with it through lean years and through good years. The Lake of the Woods was home and livelihood to us for four generations.”

“The Native Americans never altered or changed the lake in hundreds of years because they were ‘native’ to it. The lake did not begin to change until the late 1800s when the dam was built in Kenora and the big fishery started. But even those changes on the lake had little effect on the long-term health of the resource. However, in just the last twenty-five years, increased tourist traffic and sport fishing usage have had a lasting and perhaps devastating effect on the lake, the shoreline, and on the culture of those that depend on it for a living.”

“Just a couple of years ago I attended the grand opening of the new Red Lake Indian tribe’s gambling casino in Warroad. They had bought and renovated the Morey Fish House—where Lake of the Woods commercial fishermen had sold their fish for close to a hundred years—into their casino. Nearly everyone in northern Minnesota and North Dakota had bought their fish at Morey’s Fish House—now it was a casino.

“Congressman Peterson and State Rep. Tunheim were the speakers for the grand opening honoring the new casino. Listening to their warm words of praise and encouragement, I thought, ‘What a turnabout! They now support and encourage casino gambling as a compatible and useful tool in the tourist development of Lake of the Woods, in place of a commercial fishery that produced food for people that enjoyed eating fish, but for one reason or another were unable to catch them! This fishing resource we have, in some countries it would be carefully cultivated for food.

“No warden would ever go into a resort and check their docks and check their limits or anything. And still won’t. Because if they do somebody phones a damned legislator up: ‘He ain’t gonna come back and rent my cabins.’

“For Lake of the Woods, which is a pretty fair-sized lake, I think the warden in town has got a 16-foot Crestliner with a goddamned little outboard, and is somebody from Minneapolis who couldn’t find his way out to the end of the harbor, even. And that’s enforcement.

“And if my experience is right, and it is right, if you ever want to see a game hunter destroy our resources, go on into the sportsmen’s group. The guys that killed all the buffalo, all the pigeons. I always say that someday they’ll be standing there with 10-gauge shotguns shooting the last goose that flies overhead.

“This is the direction of harvest that we’re moving into that means only the very affluent will have the privilege pretty soon, for instance as fishing gets tougher on the lake, if you want to pay \$75 an hour for a charterboat, he’ll get you some fish. But the guy who brought his wife and kids on up here, and put his little boat in the lake to go out and catch a little fish and have a good

time, he'll have to find another place because he won't be able to catch the fish. Not without expensive downriggers, a 30-, 40-, 50-, 100-thousand dollar boat.

“That’s my observation here and I know because we’re in tourist country here. It is pretty much all tourist now. The fishery where we sold our fish is an Indian gambling casino now. Now I would say to guests, if fish was harvested from the lake and processed for people to eat that like fish and don’t like to fish, or older people, what more beneficial thing to the country might be a commercial fishery or is it the casino, with a few hundred slot machines goin’?”

Minneapolis Star and Tribune. Sunday, Sept. 29, 1985. A state government decision to phase out commercial fishing on LOTW and Rainy Lake by 1992. Fourteen of the 15 gillnetters who worked those lakes turned in his license for \$71,000 each. Fourth generation Art Johnston, 34, refused the money and kept fishing. He’s bitter about the developments. “We’re food producers. We butted heads with the sports ethic.”

The massive lake that borders Ontario, Manitoba and two counties of Minnesota. Sport fishermen and resort owners. The demise of the commercial fisherman began in 1948 when the state adopted an attrition policy preventing professional licenses from being sold or otherwise transferred. In 1982, a compromise was struck between commercial and sport fishermen. The deal permitted commercial fishermen to sell or transfer licenses but required them to stay out of some sections of LOTW, and accept a quota on walleyes. The compromise would have preserved commercial fishing forever. Instead the sporting interests moved for an outright ban.

The Minnesota Sportsfishing Congress, the LOTW Resort Association, and others lobbied for the buyout that began this summer (1985.) They argued that netters significantly reduced the number of large walleyes available to anglers.

Under terms of the legislation, all gill net walleye fishing must end after the 1987 season, and all other commercial walleye fishing after 1991. (trap nets). The commercial quota on walleye decreases each year, as does the buyout price offered fishermen. The buyout is financed by a \$2.50 surcharge on sport fishing licenses.

According to Don Woods, assistant chief of fisheries at the DNR, the total catch by sport fishermen has grown over the years. He believes resort owners and sport fishermen hurt each other more than commercial fishermen hurt them. Sport anglers surpassed commercial fishermen in poundage around 1970, he said.

Before quotas restricted their catch, commercial fishermen took about 200,000 pounds of walleye each year from LOTW and Rainy Lake. Sport fishermen took 300,000.

Before the buyout there were 10 commercial fishermen on LOTW and 5 on Rainy Lake.

According to Larry Cauble, a representative of the LOTW Resort Association, the demise of commercial fishing was inevitable. “Fishing clubs all over the state just kept harping, and just kept sending notes to their legislators. I didn’t realize it was this powerful.”

“People get put out of business every day,” he said. “This is an act of the Legislature. It passes laws every day that put people out of business.” Survival, Cauble said, depends on “who screams the loudest and has the best cause.”

“Arthur Johnston said he resisted the buyout because he can make about \$5,000 more fishing than the state would pay him not to catch his quota in 1985. Johnston says he sells most of his walleye retail to area restaurants, residents, and tourists.

“I meet that lake on its terms, not just mine. I see it when the wind’s blowing, when it’s hailing out. It’s a challenge and I like that.

“There’s that independence. I can quit whenever I want to, pull the nets up if something comes up. I’m pretty much in charge. I’d rather do fishing than anything else.”

All of Lake of the Woods’ commercial fishermen took the state’s forced buyout except Alvin Johnston’s son Arthur. He opted instead, to fish out the clock, until October, 19__ , when he was forced to reel in his gillnets for the last time.

“Today’s catch is what I expected,” wrote Johnston, as he recounted his last trip, in the final chapter of his father’s book. “Too many walleyes and too few northerns. 100 more pounds of walleyes and I fill up my quota. I get that 100 pounds in the first 400 feet of net.

“This whole year had been atypical. Normally I would be fishing all my legally allowed 3,000 feet of gillnets, but now I’ve only got 1,000 feet of net out. Fishing such a small amount of gear means it will be another easy day. If I had been fishing all my gear, I would have filled up the walleye quota that the politicians had put on me in only one month. The biggest abnormality of the year is that I have been trying *not* to catch them. Nearly all my fishing life I’ve spent trying to catch walleyes. They’re the money fish. But this year I’ve tried every trick of the trade not to catch walleye. Maybe old habits die hard. No matter what I do, I keep catching too many walleyes.

“So I return the excess walleyes to the lake. Nearly all of them are alive in my gillnets and the only damage to them is occasional scales pulled off in getting them out of the net. At this time of year, the gillnet does less damage to walleye than a sportsman’s hook does.

“It seems silly to pick a fish just to have to throw it back and I am glad that there are fewer walleyes here than there’s been most of the month. It’s been a hard year in the sense that I’ve had to throw so much money away. Every walleye I’ve thrown back is throwing away \$4.00. I’ve thrown back thousands of them—and thousands and thousands of dollars.

“Politics is more than silly, it’s disgusting. As one of the fishery scientists once told me, ‘Back in the feudal days, the resources were divvied up according to the whims of the kings and the noblemen. But now it’s different. Now the people holding political power divvy it up according to their whims.’

“...The politicians, the DNR, and the sports kept telling us, ‘We don’t want to put you out of business. We just want you to stop catching walleyes. There are lots of fish out there you can make money at. You just aren’t trying hard enough to sell those other fish.’

“Well, maybe they are right. Maybe we could make a living without walleyes—I was willing to give it a try, and there were sure plenty of fish in the lake. If I wanted to be a fisherman, I had no choice but to give it a try. The politicians only banned gillnets and catching walleye. We could still use trapnets and catch northerns, perch, and saugers. None of the other fishermen were willing to give it a try, but I went to Green Bay on Lake Michigan and bought some perch nets and used my father’s license to experiment with them. And they worked! They not only caught lots of perch, but also saugers; and both of these had prices comparable to walleyes. It looked like I had found a way to keep fishing and still be within the limits of the new law!

“But I underestimated the DNR’s antagonism toward commercial fishing. As soon as the DNR figured I was serious about fishing for perch and saugers with trapnets, they took it upon themselves to expand the walleye ban, by Commissioners’ Order, to all fish except tullibees, suckers and burbot. Right. Sure. The DNR isn’t trying to put us out of business; we can still make a living catching burbot and suckers and tullibees.”

In the *Star and Tribune* piece, Art Johnston said, “The net is pulled. We head back to Warroad. There are more cars around the fishery than when we left. John and I fillet up the walleyes and some of the northerns. The last walleye and then the last northern [pike] is sold.

Most of the cars leave without getting any fish. There are no more fish for sale.”

When confronted with a disappointed customer, who asked him, “What happened to all the fishermen that used to be around here,” Johnston responded bitterly, “Well, the fish are in the lake. If you want to find out what happened to all our fishermen go talk to your local friendly politicians. If you want to buy any fish, go to Canada.”

Sport and commercial fishermen continue to share the Canadian waters of Lake of the Woods. In 1985, the Canadian government issued 44 gillnet licenses in LOTW, and 13 on the Canadian side of Rainy Lake. The government also permits Indians to use gill nets for subsistence fishing.

(Get landings from the Ontario Fish Producers Association.)

Warroad Heritage Center for old photos